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By Craig Jarvis

Gov. Roy Cooper signed into law on Thursday legislation promoting solar energy in the state, and issued an executive order encouraging wind power development despite an 18-month moratorium on wind projects included in the bill.

Cooper said his executive order clarifies that wind projects can proceed through the initial permit stages — and that the state should do all it can to help them along — regardless of the temporary ban.

The bulk of House Bill 589 is an alternative energy plan painstakingly constructed over months of work by legislators and stakeholders. It became controversial in the final days of the General Assembly's session this year when a provision banning wind projects for four years was added, and ultimately revised to 18 months.

It was not clear until Thursday whether the wind ban was a deal-breaker for the governor, who said he would confer with experts and interested parties to help make up his mind.

"A strong renewable energy industry is good for our environment and our economy," Cooper said in a statement his office released Thursday. "This bill is critical for the future of significant increases in our already booming solar industry.

"I strongly oppose the ugly, last-minute, politically motivated wind moratorium. However, this fragile and hard fought solar deal will be lost if I veto this legislation and that veto is sustained."

The wind provision was pushed by Sen. Harry Brown of Jacksonville, is the Republican majority leader in the Senate. Brown has said he is concerned that wind towers could interfere with the state's military bases on training flights. He has consistently noted that it would be economically devastating if the state lost any of its bases due to periodic realignment of military facilities.

The state benefits in jobs and investments far more from military bases than it does from the solar or wind industries, Brown said Thursday.

"Regardless of Gov. Cooper's incorrect assumptions about why I support this bill, I am grateful he signed it, which will ensure North Carolina's military installations are fully protected while still allowing proposed new wind facilities to move forward on a prudent time line," Brown said in a statement. "It is encouraging the governor did not ignore feedback from military advisers and risk North Carolina's second-largest industry and the hundreds of thousands of good jobs it supports."

Cooper acknowledged the military's significance in North Carolina in his order, but he said the permit process already requires wind facilities' impact on bases be considered, and so the moratorium was unnecessary.

The governor's order directs the state's environmental regulators and military affairs officials to expedite permit review and processing so they can begin operations soon after the moratorium expires.

Clean-energy advocates and prospective wind-tower operators have expressed concerns that the moratorium will discourage further development of the industry in the state.

Legislators who supported the moratorium said it wouldn't hamper future projects, since there was nothing in the bill that prohibited them from developing and submitting plans and other paperwork, and nothing that stopped state regulators from reviewing them.

But two proposed wind farm companies said earlier this month that they would likely pull out of North Carolina if the moratorium were imposed. Both projects were expected to apply for permits as early as this year, and begin generating power by 2019. The Amazon wind farm in northeastern North Carolina is the only operating facility in the state.

Brown said Thursday that those two wind project proposals can still advance if they choose because they are not close to applying for permits yet.

The rest of the bill was heralded as an important step forward in the advancement of solar energy. It will allow people to lease solar panels on their roofs rather than having to buy them outright.

It includes an agreement to resolve conflicts over the location of utility-scale solar farms, and reduce the amount that Duke Energy would pay industrial solar farms for electricity.

It will require electric utilities to allow state residents to buy stakes in solar farms not on their property, in order to obtain credit for the power their shares generate.

"Modernizing North Carolina's energy grid with a pro-growth approach will protect ratepayers and power North Carolina's economy forward," House Speaker Tim Moore said in a statement. "We're helping North Carolina remain a national leader in renewable power and job growth by making clean energy more accessible and affordable to average citizens."

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